

Policy Type: Core Operations
Policy Name: Conflict and Complaint
Resolution¹

The Association is committed to creating and maintaining an organizational environment characterized by constructive, productive and supportive working relationships. These are ones that are open to contrasting styles of understanding and acting and different points of view and that recognize that human interactions are complex, often difficult, and that we all can contribute to their success and breakdown.

All persons involved with the Association have an obligation to communicate openly and respectfully with one another and to provide reasons for particular decisions or actions. When disagreements arise, greater understanding by all is needed. The presence of conflict, if dealt with effectively, offers an opportunity for individual and organizational learning including the identification of policies and practices which need to be improved.

Conflict situations should be addressed at the earliest possible opportunity as unresolved conflict can lead to a stressful, and in the worst cases, a poisoned, work environment.

In the event that any person or group is experiencing a work –related conflict or has a complaint about the actions of another person, the following guidelines will apply.

1. Communicate directly with the person or persons whose actions are the cause of the complaint. People should reasonably expect to know if their behaviour or their decision is a problem for another person or group.
2. If the circumstances are such that the person with a complaint is unable or unwilling to communicate directly with the persons or persons whose actions are the cause of their complaint, either for fear of it going badly, or of reprisal, the help of others should be sought in resolving the conflict.
3. Complaints and conflicts that cannot be resolved by those directly involved will be dealt with by the executive director and, if not resolved at this level, or the executive director's actions are the cause of the problem, by the Board.² The executive director or the board may seek outside or independent assistance in resolving the conflict.
4. Communication of the complaint or conflict shall first be made verbally. If this does not lead to a resolution that is satisfactory to the complainant, the nature of the complaint should be communicated in writing to the Executive Director or Chair of the Board. Such communication should be no more than one page and be descriptive in outlining the events that gave rise to the complaint or conflict.
5. Persons involved in helping resolve the conflict can play a facilitation or mediation role where the goal is to help the parties restore a positive working relationship in the future, or a decision-

making /arbitration role where they investigate what happened and make a determination of who is responsible for the situation and what the consequences for the parties should be. The choice of these two approaches should be offered to the parties. If a mediated approach fails to resolve the matter, an arbitrated approach can be undertaken.

6. The parties will refrain from drawing others into the process as a way of garnering support or getting attention. This can escalate the problem and can be damaging to the organization.
7. Complaints and conflicts shall be dealt with in a confidential manner. Meetings to resolve a complaint shall be open only to the parties and those attempting to resolve the complaint. The parties may have an advocate or supporter present. Meetings may be with the parties individually, together or both. In the interest of openness, no minutes or written record of what is said in these meetings shall be recorded although, if the parties agree, the outcome of the meetings or a resulting agreement may be documented.³
8. Where the board is involved in a conflict resolution role, communication with it should be directly with the Chair not with the whole board. It is the chair's duty to inform the entire board of the existence of the conflict but a committee of the board may be struck in order to help resolve the matter.
9. The parties, and those helping to resolve the conflict, should avoid communicating the details of a complaint, making or responding to allegations or giving advice by e-mail. Face-to-face communication, as difficult as it is, should be relied upon. E-mail messages can be used for arranging meeting meetings or communicating details of the resolution process.

It should also be noted that:

10. The Executive Director or Chair of the Board have an obligation to act immediately in addressing a complaint if the physical and mental health and safety of any of the parties is perceived to be at risk. In doing so one of the parties may be granted a temporary leave of absence with pay until the issue has been satisfactorily resolved or up to two weeks, which ever is shorter.⁴
11. If threats to persons are made, or the Executive Director or Chair of the Board perceives a possible danger to a party or to other employees, including the possibility of one party being a danger to themselves, external professional assistance must be sought immediately.

¹ This policy blends a formal grievance procedure that one might find in a unionized setting and a more general approach to conflict resolution. This policy is also not strictly an operational policy that falls to the executive director to implement; the board has role to play too.

² This policy, despite its length, is oriented to smaller organization. Larger organizations with departments or working groups would want supervisors involved in conflict resolution at levels "lower" than that of the executive director.

³ Confidentiality in dispute resolution processes is generally thought to be a good practice. A good case can be made for having some documentation, at least of the fact that a conflict resolution meeting took place and that a resolution was found or not, to put in personnel files. Indeed, in a situation where it is determined that the conflict is tied to the executive director failure to follow or implement board policy, the fact of incident ought to be documented in order to be employed as a piece of evidence in the evaluation of the executive director.

⁴ The leave with pay idea here is just an example.